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ABSTRACT

Some work in feminist psychology has suggested that male-female differences are not as universal, dramatic, or enduring as has been previously asserted. Feminist psychodynamic theories, in contrast, assert that there are deep-seated and enduring differences between women and men in "self-structure" and relational capacities. Proponents of these theories view gender differences as universal, highly dichotomized, and enduring. Using constructivism as a conceptual framework, gender theories can be considered as representations which either exaggerate or minimize male-female differences. The tendency to exaggerate differences is called "alpha bias," and the tendency to minimize differences is called "beta bias." Alpha bias can be seen in psychodynamic theories, Parson's sex role theory, and in feminist psychodynamic theories. Beta bias can be seen in psychological research on men which is incorrectly generalized to women, in theories that view male and female roles as complementary, in some systems approaches to family therapy, and in recent social policies. All current representations of gender involve alpha and beta bias. The constructivist view holds that the true nature of gender is undecidable. Theories are thus evaluated not by correctness but by utility, by examining how representations of gender have been used to provide the symbols and support the scientific and sociopolitical aims of either the status quo or feminism. (NB)

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GENDER AND THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

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What is the meaning of gender? Our purpose here is not to answer that question but to examine that question. How have we framed the problem?

Conventional meanings of gender typically focus on difference and hierarchy. They emphasize how women differ from men, and use those differences to reinforce the norm of male superiority and male privilege. Paradoxically, the denial of gender differences occurs as well. Psychology has accepted the cultural meaning of gender as difference and, further, offered scientific justification for gender inequality, as the work of the other panelists has shown (Lott, 1985; Morawski, 1985; Unger, in press; Weisstein, 1971).

Feminist attempts to challenge conventional meanings of gender have also centered on differences between women and men. One important line of feminist inquiry in psychology re-examines gender with the goal of sorting out genuine male-female differences from stereotypes. Some examples include: Hyde's (1981) meta-analyses of cognitive differences; Maccoby and Jacklin's (1975) review of sex differences; and Eccles's work on math achievement (Eccles & Jacobs, 1986). The results of this work reveal that male-female differences are not as universal, as dramatic, or as enduring as has been asserted. Moreover, this work questions the origins of difference, replacing biological

explanations with social and cultural ones. Gender is seen as the product of social relations, and thus culturally and historically fluid.

Recent feminist psychodynamic theories such as those of Chodorow (1978), Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983), and the Stone Center take a tack diametrically opposed to this. They assert that there are deep-seated and enduring differences between women and men in "self-structure" and relational capacities. Gilligan (1982), Keller (1985), and Belenky et al. (1986) have further argued that these differences in identity give rise to cognitive differences: that is, differences in moral reasoning and in acquiring and organizing knowledge. Although feminist psychodynamic theorists disagree about the origins of gender differences, they view them as universal (at least within contemporary Western culture), highly dichotomized, and enduring.

Thus, two widely held but incompatible views of gender exist within feminist psychology, one that sees few differences between males and females, the other that sees profound differences. Both are backed by empirical evidence, primarily quantitative in the first case and qualitative in the second. We believe that further research is unlikely to help us choose between these views because of their different basic assumptions. Instead, a different level of problem conceptualization is needed.

The conceptual framework we offer is that of constructivism. We will first consider gender theories as representations which either exaggerate or minimize male-female differences. We will

then examine the utility of these representations of gender: for whom are they useful and in what ways?

Constructivism

Constructivism is a recent intellectual movement which concerns itself with knowledge and meaning. Constructivism challenges conventional views of how we know the world. It offers a way to reconceptualize ideas and data about gender. Constructivism holds that we do not discover reality as much as we invent it (Watzlawick, 1984). That is, we are not passive observers, but rather we actively construct the meanings which frame and organize our perceptions and experience. Thus, our understanding of reality is a representation, that is, a "re-presentation," not a replica, of what is "out there."

Representations of reality are neither arbitrary nor idiosyncratic but are shared meanings that derive from language, history, and culture. The research of every scientist is influenced by both an individual point of view and the cultural milieu. All description is evaluative. The constructivist view is that the "real" nature of male and female cannot be determined. Constructivism focuses our attention on representations of gender, instead of on gender itself.

Representations of Gender

Theories of gender as male-female difference range from minimalist to maximalist. We call the tendency to exaggerate differences "alpha bias," and the tendency to minimize differences "beta bias" (Hare-Mustin, 1987). The analogy with

hypothesis testing is apparent: alpha or type I error involves claiming a significant difference when one does not exist, beta or type 2 error involves overlooking a significant difference when one does exist. In our formulation, the term "bias" refers not to error but to the systematic inclination to emphasize certain aspects of reality and overlook others. We use the term "bias" for two reasons. First, it underscores the fact that all ideas about difference are social constructs which can never completely reflect reality. Second, both forms of bias have the potential to generate additional biases about group differences.

Alpha Bias

Alpha bias is the exaggeration of differences. The view of male and female as having mutually exclusive qualities transcends Western culture and has deep historical roots. Ideas of male-female opposition are present in Eastern philosophy, and in the works of Western philosophers from Aristotle, Aquinas, Bacon, and Descartes to the liberal theory of Locke and the romanticism of Rousseau (Grimshaw, 1986).

Alpha bias can be seen in psychodynamic theories. Freudian theory takes masculinity and male anatomy as the norm in contrast to femininity and female anatomy. The Jungian idea of the animus and the anima strongly contrasts male and female. Recent psychodynamic theories like those of Erikson (1964) and Lacan (1985) depict female experience as sharply divergent from male experience.

Parsons's sex role theory, which dominated the social theories of the 1950's and 1960's, also exaggerates male-female

differences (Parsons & Bales, 1955). The very language of sex role theory conveys the sense that roles are fixed and dichotomous, as well as separate and complementary (Thorne, 1982). Parsons's assertion that men are instrumental and women are expressive was hailed as providing the scientific basis for separate spheres for women and men. Men's nature suited them for paid work and public life; women became first in "goodness" by making their own needs secondary and altruistically donating their services to the family (Lipman-Blumen, 1984).

The role definitions that Parsons established became the criteria for distinguishing normal individuals from those who were pathological and even pathogenic (Broverman, et al., 1970). The theory of separate spheres lives on, despite the fact that women's entry into the paid labor force in this century means that most women operate in both spheres. By perpetuating the notion of separate spheres, sex role theory obscures the dual roles and work overload of most women (Hare-Mustin, in press).

Alpha bias, or the tendency to exaggerate differences, can also be seen in feminist psychodynamic theories (Chodorow, 1978; Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Their emphasis on women's special nature and the richness of women's inner life provides the underpinnings for cultural feminism, a development within feminism which encourages women's culture, celebrates female superiority, and fosters separatism.

A final example of alpha bias comes from French feminists like Cixous and Irigaray who focus on differences in language and the sexual desires of men and women (Donovan, 1985).

Beta Bias

Beta bias is the ignoring or minimizing of differences. Until the last decade, most psychological research on human behavior and development was based on male subjects (see e.g. Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). Beta bias occurs when such research is incorrectly generalized to women. Because most women live in families headed by men and apart from other women, it is assumed that women's interests are similar to men's. Also, men's attributes are more obvious because of the salience of the public sphere, including paid work, the military, and civic activities, where men predominate.

Beta bias can also be seen in theories which view male and female roles or traits as complementary. Complementarity implies symmetry and equivalence and obscures differences in power and social value. One difficulty with the concept of balancing male and female traits, as in psychological androgyny, is that masculine traits were found to be more highly valued.

Studying individuals in isolation from their social context, as is common in psychological research, readily leads to beta bias. Women and men have different access to economic and social resources, and their actions have different social meanings and consequences. These differences are overlooked when behavior is considered out of context. This is also seen in educational and behavior change programs which ignore the different reactions women and men elicit (Gervasio & Crawford, 1987; Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 1987). For example, asking for a date, a classic task in

assertiveness training, is judged differently for women and men (Muehlenhard, 1983).

Beta bias occurs in systems approaches to family therapy such as those of Haley (1976) and Minuchin (1974). The four primary axes along which hierarchies are established in all societies are class, race, gender, and age. Within families, class and race usually are constant, while gender and age vary. However, family systems theories disregard gender and view generation (that is, age) as the central organizing principle in the family (Hare-Mustin, 1987). But fathers and mothers, despite being the same generation, are unlikely to hold comparable power in the family. What systems theories put forward is a neutered representation of family life (Libow, 1985).

Beta bias, or minimizing differences, can also be seen in recent social policies. In Weitzman's (1985) research, no-fault divorce settlements were found to have lowered the standard of living of divorced women and their children an alarming 70% while raising men's 40%. Another example is comparable parental leave for men and women. However, only women need to recuperate from the physical effects of childbirth; only women can meet the demands of breastfeeding. Seemingly equal treatment overlooks the special needs of women and their responsibilities for infants.

The Utility of Gender Theories

As we have shown, all current representations of gender involve alpha and beta bias. Rather than seeking the correct representation of gender, as constructivists, we hold that the true nature of gender is undecidable. We turn to utility, not

correctness, as the way to evaluate theory. How have representations of gender been used to provide the symbols and support the scientific and sociopolitical aims of the status quo and feminism?

Alpha Bias in the Service of the Status Quo

Here are some of the ways alpha bias, the exaggeration of differences, serves the status quo.

1. Alpha bias supports the status quo by denying that change is needed in such sex-segregated domains as work and the family (Gilder, 1987; Marshner, 1982).

2. Women's presumed differences from men are used to justify unequal treatment. Thus we have assertions that:

-Women are not as able as men.

-Women are temperamentally better suited for feminine roles involving the care of others (Erikson, 1964).

-Women by their own choice prefer not to undertake stereotyped male roles, as asserted by Rosenberg (1986) in the Sears sex discrimination case.

3. Alpha bias fosters solidarity and cooperation between men by construing women as a deviant out-group, in Durkheim's terms, which is then devalued.

4. Reinforcing the "boundary" between male and female serves to diminish male fears of being identified as feminine and encourages conformity to masculine and feminine stereotypes.

5. The exaggeration of differences constructs woman as the "other" and fosters treating women as objects. Such distancing

permits hostility and abuse toward women, as seen in pornographic images and sexual and physical abuse.

Alpha Bias in the Service of Feminism

Alpha bias can also serve the aims of feminism.

1. Emphasizing commonalities among women fosters sisterhood and helps build positive emotional bonds between women. Sisterhood and solidarity foster collective action as the way to gain power.

2. Asserting differences from men allows women to assert the superiority of "female" qualities, thus reversing the cultural devaluation of women (Echols, 1983).

Beta Bias in the Service of the Status Quo

Now turning to beta bias, we see how it can support the status quo.

1. Minimizing differences absolves society from making provisions for women's needs, as in maternity leave or child care policies.

2. Formal egalitarianism ignores the wider context of social inequality and thus supports it, which benefits men. In therapy, we see this in "gender-neutral," or "sex-fair" approaches which, by ignoring differences in power and resources between women and men, may inadvertently support such differences. Margolin's critique of marital contracting illustrates this (Margolin, Talovic, Fernandez, & Onorato, 1983).

3. Ignoring differences in the sociocultural domain also leads to misplaced emphasis on psychological or biological determinants of behavior. This may give rise to "blaming the

victim" or the belief that roles can not and should not change (Rossi, 1984).

4. The presumption of equal opportunity fosters the belief that the superior performance of men is evidence of superior native ability or effort. However, when discriminatory barriers have been lifted, women have achieved success in areas ranging from athletics to the professions (Lott, 1987).

Beta Bias in the Service of Feminism

Beta bias or minimizing differences also can serve some aims of feminism.

1. By arguing that there are no differences betweeen women and men, feminists have demanded equal treatment for women under the law. This has promoted women's access to higher education, military service, and equal pay for equal work.

2. Being able to assert that women are "as good as" men is a source of pride for some women. Man is the hidden referent in our language and culture. As Spender (1984) points out, "women can only aspire to be as good as a man, there is no point in trying to be as good as a woman" (p. 201). Paradoxically, this attempt at denying differences reaffirms male behavior as the standard against which all behavior is judged.

Paradoxes for Feminist Theorists

Our discussion of the utility of alpha and beta bias for the status quo and feminism raises some complex questions. Let me draw your attention briefly to some of the paradoxes of representing gender as difference.

First, any representation of gender obscures or marginalizes other meanings. Thus, focusing on differences obscures institutional sexism, restricted opportunities, and men's control over women's lives. The focus on women's experience and especially their "inner life" also prompts a turning away from efforts to change the material conditions of women's lives (Tobias, 1986; Russ, 1986). Furthermore, the assertion of a female way of knowing and the rejection of all previous thought as "male" implies that women are incapable of acquiring the knowledge of the culture, and indeed, of rational thought.

Separatism, an offshoot of cultural feminism and alpha bias, involves several paradoxes. First, the form of any separatist movement is necessarily determined by the larger society from which separation must be effected. Second, attempts to avoid male control by separating from men leave intact the larger structure of control. And third, as Sennett (1980) observes, even when one's response to authority is defiance, that stance serves to confirm authority just as compliance does.

There is yet a further paradox of alpha bias. Qualities such as caring, expressiveness, and relationality are extolled as women's superior virtues. Yet, these qualities are seen as arising from women's subordination. Can we extol such qualities without also extolling subordination (Ringleheim, 1985)? Does women's "goodness" depend on their subordination?

Conclusion

In conclusion, male-female difference is a problematic and paradoxical way to construe gender. When we examine the utility

of alpha and beta bias, we see that both "difference" and "no difference" take the male as the standard of comparison and support the status quo. Neither effectively challenges the gender hierarchy. We have framed the problem in such a way that the solution produces "more of the same" (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

In accepting difference as the meaning of gender, feminists have accepted the construction of reality of the dominant group. But, difference is salient for men in a way it is not for women. Those who are dominant have an interest in maintaining their difference from others and obscuring the unequal arrangements which benefit them. Accepting this construction limits our understanding of gender. As one pundit said of psychology, "If they get you to ask the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about your answers." We will only escape this paradox when we destabilize and reframe the question of gender.

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